DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 536 CG 027 566

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TITLE Beyond Contemporary Confusion: Away from Punitive Practice.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Modification; Counseling Techniques; *Counseling Theories; Counselor Attitudes; *Counselor Teacher Cooperation; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Intervention; Models; Secondary School Students; *Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

Behavior management presents an ongoing challenge that requires complex intervention skills on the part of guidance personnel. This paper presents strategies for helping school-based personnel move away from traditional punitive behavior management practices that are derived from a time when public humiliation of someone for social-rule-breaking behavior was acceptable classroom practice. The following keys have the potential to unlock the complexities of behavior management and assist counselors in promoting the shift from the paradigm of "punish disruption" to "support social skilling": (1) use descriptive models; (2) intentionally avoid playing games; and (3) recognize the strength of small and incremental changes. The shift to a paradigm of support through social training has not yet gained universal appeal in schools, and it is certainly misunderstood by the general community. In order to facilitate productive and enduring change, helping professionals need to provide enough framework for teachers to participate in risk-taking behavior and trust this process to remain committed to intervention plans when the support person is no longer there. An example of this minimalist approach to behavior management is found in the Behaviour Management Skills Training Package in which a small number of useful microskills have been described in practical terms. (LSR)

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Beyond contemporary confusion : Away from punitive practice.

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Behaviour management from a guidance perspective is a complex and potentially fraught situation. We are invited, on the one hand, to witness the daily practical struggle of the teacher working at a point of need with finite emotional resources and limited options, a situation that has the potential to become in any moment overwhelming. On the other hand, we as guidance personnel are bound to keep the big picture in perspective. What is the vision of the school? What is the intent and the direction of the intervention called behaviour management, generally, or management of this particular student's behaviour in the context in which we are invited to work? The problem for effective guidance practice is one that requires a special combination of forthrightness and sensitivity that can take years of training and practice in fieldwork to refine.

My personal struggle to achieve this balance derives from a central belief (not an original idea) around which I organise my professional behaviour, and a particular focus. I behave as if I live in a democracy all of the time. This has impact on the daily choices that derive from the dilemmas hidden in each of the complex, multi-layered situations that confront people like ourselves particularly in situations that are redolent with power and control issues, people who choose to work as helpers and change agents. My sister, an Anglican priest and PhD would say we are not the ones that have done the choosing, but then again, with god as your employer you'd feel quite confident about debating this point. Our work, whether we do it because of driving ambition, or sense of vocation, or an inextricable mix of the two, lies at the critical interface of change.

Guidance work is often misunderstood, devalued and even debunked by the client group itself. The invitation to take this personally is a constant temptation to which all of us have probably succumbed, at least to some extent, at times. On the other hand,

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there is always the seduction of the role of expert with all the trappings of secret knowledge and clinical remoteness extrapolated in the ruthlessness of certain, ritualised therapies. This sometimes begins with a seduction down the honey-sweet and hopeless path of *'you are the one who will save my son (my class, my family, my marriage, my sanity). The child that no one but you understands'*.

Guidance has the opportunity to rise like the phoenix from the frozen ashes left as a legacy of the economic rationalism of right-wing decision-makers. Keeping focussed on the big picture is far more important than spending energy on worrying about the impact of daily fieldwork frustrations. Those of us who struggle with the pressure of not only the consequences of rationalist decision-making on the support available for fragile, and marginalised groups, but also misunderstanding from those for whom we are attempting to advocate, have a clear understanding of this point. Becoming consumed by coal-face frustrations is pointless and emotionally expensive. The sad comfort is that the need for helping professionals with guidance expertise has never been more evident. This paper describes a number of keys that have the potential for helping our clients move beyond contemporary confusion and away from punitive practice in behaviour management, in other words to make the shift from the paradigm of 'punish disruption' to 'support social skilling'.

Key #1: Use descriptive models.

The following model, for example, describes the difference between the focus of guidance work with administrators and teachers in behaviour management. Teachers, as coal face workers have a fine and constantly updated understanding of the details of behavioural difficulties with students and are able to comprehensively articulate their own wants as far as classroom work and curriculum engagement is concerned. Administrators, on the other hand, have a clear idea of the need to simultaneously provide support for efficient classroom work which, as a central activity, lies at the heart of the organisation and to provide leadership in the development of a set of plans that operationalise the vision of the school.

When guidance is called to facilitate the work of personnel on one or both sides of the organisation, it is useful to consider that coal face workers and big picture workers do not typically share a similar perspective on the task of, in this case, managing student behaviour. They do not necessarily share a common language and

set of concepts. Indeed, attributions made by teachers about administrators in the context of problematic behaviour management are variations on the theme of 'you don't support me'. Administrators contribute to this unproductive communication with attributions about teachers not being willing, or failing to show commitment or demonstrating inability to follow the established plans.

Guidance officers can use this model to help school-based personnel to come to grips with the idea of the reality of difference in perspective in order to move the key players beyond counterproductive communication towards problem solving that incorporates the idea of acknowledging the practical necessity of valuing that very difference. The change agent has responsibility for facilitating and articulating the intersection of the two disparate perspectives.

In my experience it is less likely that a teacher, particularly one experiencing the pain of working in 'survive the day' mode has the energy to make the imaginative leap of understanding to comprehend, and appreciate in pragmatic terms, what they have never experienced, the administrator's perspective. There may be superficial understanding of the nature of the job, but little appreciation for the kinds of skills and the time that is needed for the administrator to get the job done successfully. For example, to be an effective leader the administrator must have a vision, and then must work out ways to engage the staff in fulfilling it. Staff don't necessarily appreciate the engagement with this process and can openly express resentment for the task, partly because the relevance to their daily work is not immediately apparent.

Administrators have all been coal-face workers and demonstrate that they are located on a continuum of knowledge of the complexities of day to day classroom work. One end of the continuum is labelled 'up-to-date' and the other is 'out-of-touch'. The administrator does not always have the same picture of his/her location on the continuum that others in the organisation share. Credibility and communication issues can be confounded by this factor.

The role of guidance here can be to engage the administrator in acknowledging the different expertise of the teacher's role and to recognise that they, as leaders and managers have moved on, with consequences that include gains in perspective and losses in immediacy of experience. The wider perspective will facilitate responsible systems-level decision-making, but losses in immediacy of experience tend to allow a

certain romantic gloss to build over time. Layer after layer inexorably blur the hard-edged realities of daily classroom stressors and obscure the subtle effects of change.

Key #2: Intentionally avoiding playing games.

In difficult situations there is usually an ever-present invitation to contribute to conversations that articulate divergent perspectives from a power-game perspective. By participating, even tacitly, the guidance officer risks alienating the other sets of stakeholders. Since an underlying objective, for both process and outcome, of this specialised type of work is for the players to work cooperatively, the success of the intervention is under threat if the invitation to play is taken. A power game is played from any of three positions:

1. **Persecutor position**, where the change agent is drawn into demanding and pushing for change in the best attempt to make it happen or where they are tempted to participate in constructing more and more punitive 'management' of the perceived disruptor.
2. **Victim position**, where the change agent participates in acknowledging the legitimacy of the miserable controlling behaviour of the stakeholder or contributes to complaining interactions and inadvertently raises rather than relieves anxiety.
3. **Rescuer position**, where the change agent takes over responsibility for doing the tasks of the stakeholders.

The seduction of power games is a real danger for people working at the interface of change which is,at any moment, at the heart of conflict. It can feel 'right' to persecute, complain or rescue, and it is, in the short term at least, a popular intervention choice. The problem, though, is that power games are self-perpetuating and, by playing, nothing is achieved that is substantially different about how people are managing.

Alternate positions that are more useful:

1. Instead of persecuting **increase the others' access to information**. This can be achieved through teaching, and all the processes that are incorporated in the act of teaching including: coaching, instructing, task analysing and giving feedback. There are best practice ways to perform all of these different types of skills.

2. Instead of complaining, **reflect on practice** through structured inquiry in self-reflective processes or in group processes called critical action research. Useful questions include:
   - What happened that helped?
   - What was it that encouraged the situation to remain stuck?
   - What were the differences that made a difference?
   - How could I/we do things differently?
   - Are we getting what we wanted?
   - How outcome driven are our decisions?
   - How respectful is the process?
3. Instead of rescuing and 'doing for' **create a holding environment** that can facilitate change processes. Microskills in this intervention position include all of those that have as their base the process of active listening, for example: mediating, negotiating, educational counselling and gentle confronting. It is the intentionality of the chosen intervention that makes the difference between reactive and responsive modes, and will arbitrate the consequences.

Key #3: Recognise the strength of small and incremental changes.

Teachers, when grappling with behaviour management issues in their classrooms, are commonly at a point of need where the overriding agenda is survival. The consequences of this context for the helping professional includes:

- the teacher's capacity for accessing more information may be diminished because a survival agenda tends to imply an emotionally expensive environment
- the teacher may be so stressed and/or depressed they may not be able to entertain the possibility of failure through the trying out of new strategies
- the teacher may be so defensive about current practices that there is no possibility that there will be movement
- the teacher may be committed to change plans at a very low level of commitment and fail to follow through when the change agent's direct support is removed

In order to facilitate productive and enduring change, helping professionals need to provide <u>just enough scaffolding</u> for teachers to be able to participate in risk-taking

behaviour and trust the process enough to remain committed to intervention plans when the support person is no longer there. In behaviour management, one example of this minimalist, no-frills approach is the Behaviour Management Skills Training Package where a small number of useful microskills have been described in practical how and why terms. These self-help or collegial support materials do not pretend to be comprehensive but do provide enough scaffolding in order to help teachers increase their confidence and poise in behaviour management. Once confidence increases, the teacher is no longer at a point of need and the agenda has substantially shifted away from survival to one of experimentation where he/she becomes more able to make sense of the work.

These three keys have the potential for unlocking some of the complexities that present in the work of helping school-based personnel move away from traditional punitive behaviour management practices that derived from a time when to publicly humiliate someone for social rule breaking behaviour was acceptable classroom practice. The shift to a paradigm of support through social training has not yet gained universal appeal in our schools, and is certainly misunderstood by the general community. Punishment still appears to be the intervention of choice when the chips are down and people are under stress. We, as helping professionals, need to keep this big picture shift firmly in mind and work in resolute and courageous ways to stimulate the small difference that will make a big and enduring difference in the way that teachers, individually and in groups, manage students at the coalface.